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Intelligence at Sixes and Sevens

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AMERICA'S intelligence community is still a mess. After a two-year investigation of questionable intelligence practices (foreign assassination plots; LSD tests on unwitting subjects; political surveillance of Americans; and the like), two basic presidential executive orders, and a series of command reshuffles, one might think that the demons of the CIA's past have been finally exorcised and the agency could concentrate on the business at hand.

But this would be too good to be true. Instead, the intelligence community—a term that takes in all of America's civilian and military intelligence agencies—continues beset by problems and contradictions. There are no clear guidelines governing many intelligence procedures. Interagency rivalries are not abating. The CIA must report to *eight* congressional committees on its ongoing activities—which is overdoing "oversight." Worst of all, intelligence people are splitting into hostile camps over what was right or wrong about the past.

Moreover, the intelligence community is in the midst of a fundamental reorganization—not likely to be completed before 1980—as the Congress drafts new legislative charters for the CIA, the National Security Agency, the Defense Intelligence Agency, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation. There are many uncertainties about what these charters will finally provide—lots of intelligence people fear the community will be overregulated, while a great many Americans are worried about insufficient statutory controls.

To compound matters, Admiral Stansfield Turner, the Carter-appointed director of central intelligence (the fifth intelligence boss in five years), has a tendency to run the highly politicized community as if it were Captain Queeg's destroyer. Although the size of the CIA has to be reduced to meet the new constraints and requirements—its payroll has in fact been steadily trimmed over the years—Turner chose to apply virtual court-martial techniques to the massive firings he ordered in the agency's clandestine-services division last year. And if one is to believe CIA insiders as well as his White Ho[illegible] of the intelligence community.

The complaint about Turner is that he understands neither the craft of intelligence nor the politics of Washington. Not surprisingly then, the morale at the CIA's headquarters in Langley, Virginia, is even lower these days than during the years when the agency went through the crucible of congressional investigation.

Still unresolved, at least in the minds of large numbers of intelligence officers, is the role of the CIA in an open society. This is illustrated by agency "traditionalists'" continuing attacks on former CIA director William E. Colby for having been unexpectedly and disturbingly candid with congressional investigating committees during 1975.

The anti-Colby faction is largely inspired by Richard M. Helms, another former CIA director. The Helms faction takes the view that all intelligence secrets have to be protected at any cost—even from the Congress. This traditionalist stance goes back to cold war days, when the agency was free to do virtually what it pleased.

Colby, himself a clandestine-services veteran, sees the workings differently—and more thoughtfully. While arguing that sensitive intelligence operations must remain hidden from the public eye, he also believes that the intelligence community in this age must be accountable to the President and the Congress. Otherwise, he feels the dilemma of intelligence services' functioning in a free society will never be resolved to the satisfaction of most Americans.

In light of all the controversy surrounding the intelligence community, the obvious question is, How effective is the community at this stage in feeding quality information to policy makers?

The answer is not easy, inasmuch as the flow of intelligence is highly classified and cannot be matched against open assessments of world events. However, most of the community's efforts and resources are concentrated these days on collection and evaluation of intelligence. In the case of the CIA, all its paramilitary functions have been transferred to the Defense Department, and its capabilities for so-called covert political action (the euphemism for export of or against foreign governments) have been sharply curtailed.

Both the CIA and the National Security Agency, which is run by the Pentagon, place increasing emphasis on immensely sophisticated electronic espionage, covering everything from Soviet observance of the strategic arms limitation treaty (SALT) to rice crops in China. Obviously, both agencies also try to eavesdrop on Communist leaders and others. All this surveillance is supplemented by human agents, often deeply embedded in the Soviet Union and elsewhere.

Consumers of intelligence—i.e., the White House and the State and Defense departments—say that on the whole they are getting a reasonably good product from the community. Under Colby, the evaluation process was streamlined in a satisfactory fashion, but Turner is trying a new approach that has yet to prove itself.

When the CIA has made public its conclusions, controversy has often developed. Many experts, for example, reject the agency's conclusion that by 1985 the Soviet Union will become a net importer of oil (she is now a major exporter). But there is no way of telling whether similar controversies will surround the agency's top-secret conclusions on other topics.

Clearly, there is no perfect intelligence, and there always will be disagreements among experts. But when it comes to adequate intelligence, so much is at stake in terms of national security that the health of the intelligence community must be the foremost foreign policy concern. We cannot conduct a rational foreign policy without a high-quality flow of intelligence: No serious decisions are possible if we don't understand on an around-the-clock basis the meaning of events in our nuclear world.

Unfortunately, however, all signs are that the intelligence community, particularly the CIA, has not yet overcome the accumulation of problems that renders it somewhat less dependable than is humanly possible. In the electronic age of intelligence, political leaders tend to overlook the human factor, which, among other things, means the morale of men and women responsible for the kind of flow of intelligence the